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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a historical background of hermeneutics, a method of textual analysis that is an "artful" form of understanding and a process of exposing hidden meanings. The paper discusses the evolution of hermeneutics, as well as the philosophical influences of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Noting that a close link between phenomenology and hermeneutics has resulted in the terms often being used interchangeably and universally, the paper points out that philosophical beliefs differ among phenomenologists and hermeneutic philosophers. Phenomenologists focus on the lived experience of persons eliciting commonalities and shared meanings, whereas hermeneutics refers to an interpretation of language. The paper compares and contrasts these perspectives by summarizing the philosophical assumptions of Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer. It explores concepts such as bracketing, prejudice, horizon, historical consciousness, and hermeneutic circle. A blending of critical social theory and hermeneutics has resulted in a methodology of critical hermeneutics. This methodology emphasizes an interpretation of language, as well as silence, while also situating the text and the interpreter in their socio-cultural traditions. (Contains 20 references.) (BT)

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Hermeneutics 101

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Hermeneutics, a method of textual analysis, means to interpret. Hermeneutics is an artful form of understanding and a process of exposing hidden meanings. Historically, hermeneutics has been associated with the interpretation of biblical texts. This presentation will provide a historical background of hermeneutics. The evolution of hermeneutics will be discussed, as well as the philosophical influences of Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer.

A close link between phenomenology and hermeneutics has resulted in the terms often being used interchangeably and universally. However, philosophical beliefs differ among phenomenologists and hermeneutic philosophers. Phenomenologists focus on the lived experience of persons eliciting commonalities and shared meanings, whereas hermeneutics refers to an interpretation of language. Yet, there is no absolute or universal definition of either hermeneutics or phenomenology. These perspectives will be compared and contrasted by summarizing the philosophical assumptions of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Concepts such as bracketing, prejudice, horizon, historical consciousness, and hermeneutic circle will be explored. A blending of critical social theory and hermeneutics has resulted in a methodology of critical hermeneutics. This methodology emphasizes an interpretation of language, as well as silence, while also situating the text and the interpreter in their socio-cultural traditions.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, a method of textual analysis, emphasizes the sociocultural and historic influences on inquiry. Hermeneutics pertains to the process of exposing hidden meanings (Allen, 1995; Kisiel, 1985). Hermeneutics has historically been associated with the interpretation of biblical texts. According to Thompson (1990, p. 230), hermeneutics was "derived from the Greek verb, *hermeneueuein*, 'to interpret,' and from the noun, *hermeneia*,

or 'interpretation'." Hermeneutics is an artful form of understanding (Wiehl, 1990). The evolution of hermeneutics will be discussed, as well as the philosophical orientation supporting this study. This second chapter concludes with a discussion of critical hermeneutics, based on the philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer.

In the 19th century, hermeneutics moved from an analysis of texts to a perspective oriented to understanding human science. Gadamer (1975/1994) described Schleirmacher, an early hermeneutic philosopher, as searching for a theory to reconstruct literary work in the understanding as it was originally intended. Dilthey, expanded Schleirmacher's work, and "rethought his notion of understanding to mean the ability to reconstruct the same intentionality or symbolism of the agent" (Hiraki, 1989, p. 23). This conceptualization resulted in the notion of intersubjectitivy, a common thread of current hermeneutic understanding. Intersubjectivity assumes persons share a common world.

A close link between phenomenology and hermeneutics has resulted in the terms being used interchangeably and universally. Yet, philosophical beliefs differ among phenomenologists and hermeneutic philosophers. Phenomenologists focus on the lived experience of persons eliciting commonalities and shared meanings, whereas hermeneutics refers to an interpretation of language. However, there is no absolute or universal definition of either hermeneutics or phenomenology.

Husserlian Hermeneutics

Edmund Husserl was an early phenomenologist philosopher, as well as a mathematician. Mathematics influenced his view of epistemology. He sought a logical method of discovering the experience of consciousness. An idealist, he believed that all matter was reduced to mental states. Husserl's basis of knowledge or epistemology was actualized by reducing, or bracketing as he called it, our consciousness to ascertain the essences of the phenomena in question. For example, if I wanted to know about water, I would bracket everything I already knew about water. Bracketing would enable me to identify the essences constituting water that were free of my prior experiences with water.

Yet, if I carry this concept to the extreme, if I "bracket" even the concept of water, how can I know what my inquiry is about? Bracketing assumes persons can separate their knowledge from their lived experiences. Thompson (1990) described three concepts of Husserlian phenomenology subscribed to by researchers using this perspective: "(1) an analysis of the subject and object-as-the-object-appears-through-consciousness, (2) an emphasis on bracketing or epoche as a method for suspending naive realist awareness, and (3) an emphasis on describing the full appearance of the object of inquiry" (p. 233).

Husserlian phenomenology has been used as a theoretical perspective for some nursing studies (Oiler, 1982; Omery, 1983). The term and method of "bracketing" is embedded in Husserlian beliefs yet often applied universally to phenomenology (Grams, 1993, Oiler, 1982; Omery, 1983). However, the assumptions underlying bracketing are not universally accepted by many phenomenologists and researchers (Benner, 1984; Diekelmann, 1993; & Maloney, 1993). A Heideggarean perspective of understanding challenges the assumption of bracketing

Heideggerean Hermeneutics

Many of Husserl's perspectives were reconceived by his junior colleague, Martin Heidegger. Heidegger emphasized the ontology of Being as opposed to the epistemologic question of knowing. A person, a Being-in-the-World, cannot be separated from the world. Heidegger's philosophy offered an alternate world view from Husserl's belief of a subject-object split. As human-being or *Dasien*, our meaning is codeveloped through being born human and through our life experiences and background. Heidegger acknowledged our background as "throwness." Persons are "thrown" or born into a particular gender, culture, and history. While throwness prohibits an objective viewpoint, it enables persons to have shared practices and common meanings by virtue of the fact that they share a similar kind of *Being*. Heidegger did not believe it was possible to "bracket" our assumptions of the world. Yet, through authentic reflection we may be able to become aware of many of our assumptions. Heideggarian hermeneutics can be defined as a way to "interpret the shared

meanings and practices that we have for our experiences within a context" (Maloney, 1993, p. 40).

The concept of a hermeneutic circle was introduced by Heidegger as a way to understand our Being-in-the-World. As Tina Koch (1995), a nurse researcher stated in her article that described the interpretive approaches for nursing research: "For Heidegger, understanding is no longer conceived of as a way of knowing but as a mode of being, as a fundamental characteristic of our 'being' in the world" (p. 831). As a research methodology, hermeneutics assumes meaning making embedded in the process of dialogue between interpreter and narrator. The hermeneutic circle is a way of articulating and interpretating discourse. This way of understanding assumes dialogue and movement between wholes of texts and parts of texts. Heidegger believed that language was constituent of our Being because language preceded us. Language enables people to identify phenomena. However, language may also be restrictive by limiting our understanding of the world.

Gadamerian Hermeneutics

Hans-Georg Gadamer extended Heidegger's work on hermeneutics by emphasizing the embeddedness of language in our understanding of our world. In 1975, Hans-Georg Gadamer's text, entitled *Truth and Method*, identified the necessity of historical consciousness within hermeneutics. My interpretation of Gadamer's work is that he extends philosophical hermeneutics to critical hermeneutics by stressing the importance of tradition, or background, in our ways of understanding. Gadamer (1975, 1976) asserted that understanding was always a historical, dialectic, and linguistic event. This understanding occurs from interpretations embedded within our linguistic and cultural traditions (Annells, 1996; Pascoe, 1996).

Prejudice, defined by Gadamer (1976), was prejudgment. Prejudices are our preconceived notions of things, emanating from our past experience and socialization. In the positivist/empirical and Husserlian views of truth, the way to eradicate prejudice was to maintain objectivity by "bracketing" experiences. However, Heidegger and Gadamer

believed this was impossible. To understand another we cannot shed our past experience, because it is this past experience that actually facilitates understanding another. Experience is an ongoing examination of status quo. Gadamer advocated continual striving to explicate our prejudices. The philosophers Grondin (1990) and Maguire (1991), in their writings of Gadamer, identified the importance of understanding of our prejudices. Grondin stated,

> For whomever pronounces himself or herself free of prejudices is all the more blindly exposed to their power. Prejudices will exercise their underground domination all the more strongly, and potentially distortingly, when denied or repressed. (p. 54)

Maguire (1991) stated

> To be engaged in a conversation with a text is to bring one's prejudices into play. On the basis of one's prejudices' one is able to understand the content of what the text says. The reader is engaged from a definite point of view and is only able to understand the content of the text from this perspective. The very fact that we question the text suggests that we are trying to transcend our own prejudices. (p. 40)

This quote is also reiterated by Koch (1995) who believed that Gadamer's contribution to research methodology is the attention to detail and judgement-making in the research process. The prejudices of the researcher originate from the researcher's historical background. Rather than being an impediment to knowledge making, it is the researcher's values that provide contextual meaning to their consumers. Therefore one research implication of critical hermeneutics is explicating a lens for analysis. Another research implication is making the researcher's judgements explicit, can be done by the researcher documenting decisions in a research journal.

Another Gadamerian concept is the metaphor of horizon. Conscious awareness is one definition of horizon. According to Maguire "having a horizon entails being aware of the limits of one's perspectives" (p. 108). In an article on hermeneutic phenomenology, Merilyn

Annells (1996) described the aim of hermeneutic inquiry as the "fusion of horizons of the interpreter and the text" (p. 707).

Gadamer (1975, 1976) advocated dialogue or conversation as a way of uncovering knowledge and reducing the embedded political power in our discourse. Gadamer stressed the importance of reflection and conversation in knowing. Conversation assumes mutuality of question and answer (Gadamer, 1976; Wright, 1990). Gadamer proposed that through conversation with the text or with one another an event of understanding will occur that can not be predicted nor controlled. He believed that true conversation is when persons are open and equally participative and interested in achieving common understanding. Gadamer's perspective of dialogue is congruent with what Henry Giroux (1992) labeled as crossing the borders, minimizing the established boundaries between margin and center. For this study, an assumption is that the borders of our perspectives are influenced by our racial backgrounds, historical consciousness, language, and prejudices. A lens of racial bias may assist us in crossing the borders and broadening our horizon that were handed down to us through our cultural upbringing.

Gadamer's hermeneutics supports the mutuality of theory and practice or praxis. The meaning of praxis is a holism of language, knowing, and action. In noting Gadamer's concept of understanding, Grondin (1990) stated

> Gadamer is again inspired by the rhetorical tradition in stressing the role application plays in acquiring an understanding. To understand a text or a meaning is always to know how to apply it to our situation. The application, however, is not a process that begins after understanding. There is not first understanding and only later an application of what is understood to the present. To understand and to apply to one's own situation constitute, according to Gadamer, one and the same hermeneutic event. (pp. 51-52)

In examining the language of race, class or gender, one must acknowledge differences as well as an ongoing examination of our prejudices. This is contrasted with a current

cultural belief of ignoring difference or practicing color-blindness in the pursuit of equality. Critical hermeneutics emphasizes an interpretation of language as well as examining omissions. Methodologic implications of Gadamer support a method of interpretive content analysis in contrast to a research method of content analysis of absolute and universally defined words and categories. Critical hermeneutics supports a method for identifying and critiquing language or silence embedded within socio-cultural traditions. This may be done through the researcher's horizon or lens of analysis.

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